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"Settling Borders for Democracy and Profit "

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Douglas Gibler currently studies territoriality and the effect of borders on regime type and state behavior. In doing so, he also deals directly with the issue of joint democracy and its effects on interstate peace and conflict.

Gibler pointed out the importance of contiguity and the extent to which borders between two states are settled and how it they predict peaceful relations between them. A significant portion of all militarized disputes occur between contiguous states. In fact, nearly 90% of wars that took place between 1815 and 1980 were fought between neighbors. Gibler said that among the causes of these wars, territorial issues were the most prominent.

Disputes over territory are the most war-prone of all issues because they are likely to be perceived as a zero-sum game by the parties involved: one state's gain comes at the expense of the other. Therefore, they are often extremely hard to resolve without triggering animosity and long-lasting conflict. Gibler said that they also provoke certain practices within the states involved that are not conducive to democracy or peace; the traditional response in such cases is solidification, centralization and militarization of the state. As each state proceeds to display its resolve and increase its might vis-à-vis the other by allocating more resources to its military, an arms race ensues. Peaceful relations are less likely to emerge from such competition and aggression.

Engagement in conflict also has an adverse impact on internal state policies. Centralization and military buildups threaten the prospects of domestic democracy because one single group may acquire the means to dominate others. In particular, large standing armies built in anticipation of territorial conflict may actually promote domination because they impede economic development and reduce the number of autonomous social groups. Democratization, however, thrives when there is a power-sharing arrangement among equals.

Gibler argued that territorial disputes also tend to lead to aggressive bargaining, which foments conflict and makes war more likely. In contrast, absence of conflict over territory leads to a set of internal state dynamics that are conducive to domestic democracy on the one hand and to interstate peace on the other.

First, stabilized borders eliminate incentives for centralization of state and major military build-up. Hence, they do not privilege the military/bureaucratic class at the expense of others or provide a means for domination by one single group. Instead, stable borders pave the way for greater group competition. Absence of territorial conflict also brings about greater tolerance by the population for the expression of different views, particularly of dissident opinions that deviate from the proclaimed necessity of engagement in armed struggle. In other words, once external threats to the territorial integrity of a given state are removed from the state agenda, not only does militarized conflict become less likely and peace more likely, but prospects for democracy also improve substantially.

Territorial issues need not lead to war. In fact, resolving territorial issues through a territorial settlement treaty has been shown to dramatically reduce the probability of war. However, alliances to resolve such disputes are difficult to form when

borders have been drawn by former colonial powers, separating particular ethnic groups or creating noncontiguous states, or when there is a significant gap in capability among two states. "Young states" that have only recently achieved independence are particularly susceptible to engaging in militarized disputes as well as suffering democratic breakdowns because they are more likely to have outstanding territorial conflicts. Gibler also said that alliances tend to form before democracy develops, not vice versa. In other words, one cannot claim that joint democracies are more likely to enter into alliances and resolve disputes peacefully because democracy tends to obtain after stable borders are established.

Gibler's argument, which emphasizes the importance of territorial issues for prospects of peace and democracy, sets him apart from other scholars who believe in "democratic peace." Gibler argued that it is not their form of government—i.e. democracy — that makes democratic states less likely to fight each other. Democracies do not necessarily resort to peaceful means to resolve disputes, either. Rather, stable borders and the consequent absence of territorial disputes among these states have brought about peaceful interstate relations on the one hand, and have been conducive to growth of democracy domestically on the other. In other words, democracy in itself is not the main cause of peace; rather, both democracy and peace are more likely to exist and thrive in the absence of external threats.

Territorial disputes seriously inhibit the chances of development of both. Having settled borders is then the main reason democratic and peaceful states tend to cluster together in space because they are more likely neighbor one another around stable international borders. The lack of fear about territorial disputes allows a state and a society to enjoy a more stable democracy.

Douglas Gibler is Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Kentucky where he teaches courses on World Politics, American Foreign Policy, International Relations Theory, and the Causes of War. His research interests focus on the causes and consequences of international conflict and the international factors that contribute to democratic development.